

Title: *Social Politics and the Arts: An Enduring Case of Strange Bedfellows*
Submitted by Mary Sherman

This paper, *Social Politics and the Arts: An Enduring Case of Strange Bedfellows*, address the Conference topic "the tension between freedom of expression and political correctness."

Abstract Summary: It is hard to fault anyone working to make the world a better place, including artists. But good intentions can sometimes have unintended outcomes. This paper will look at the uneasy pairing of politically and socially engaged art to funding, power and the rise of populism. Although this trend is nothing new, the current state of affairs can, arguably, be traced to a number of developments in the '80s, when public pressure stopped the NEA's funding of individual artists, difficult artworks came under open attack, and marketing and public relation firms became museum mainstays. Can we really see that any of this is good for art or society?

Abstract:

Artists taking on social issues is nothing new. One only has to think of those working under the umbrella of French Realism, the American WPA, the Soviet Avant-garde, German Social Realism, and even further back to those subjected to religionist patronage. This type of art is also, typically, some of the most easily fundable, as is certainly the case now. In the US, it is nearly impossible to get funding for any work that does not purport to have a social agenda. In fact, such work is becoming so popular that public officials are eagerly coming up with new ways to engage even more artists. Many cities, thus, have taken to 'employing' artists as artists-in-residence in order to deal with any number of social ills, including the lack of arts in elementary schools. But, is all this good for art? Or even for society? Does this just represent a pendulum swing away from the bloated art market, stuck primarily on blue chip artists? Or is something else at play? The ease of describing narrative work over the more difficult task of tackling what art is best at: slippage, elusive metaphors and trafficking in the indescribable, but non-the-less tangible realm of the senses?

This paper argues that the rise of such socially engaged work is intricately tied to funding, which also is linked to power, which is certainly not without risks. In the US, this recent trend arguably began in the '80s with the public's insistence and eventual take-over of the art critic as the arbiter of taste. After the Robert Mapplethorpe debacle, the illegal dismantling of Richard Serra's Tilted Arc and public outcries against experts' notions of "quality" and something, seemingly more shameful, "art for art's sake," the public now, arguably, decides what is exhibited, reviewed, and even produced. And, the rise of the still to be definitely defined "artistic research" in Europe is just another step along this path. When, did we lose faith in the visual arts as a discipline in its own right? We certainly don't (generally) ask composers or choreographers, for instance, to tackle social ills or act as rallying cries for science – although, when they do, they have an easier time attracting funding. Why are we so unwilling to insist on visual arts' sensory appeal and the human need for this? Although this paper has every intention to acknowledge the importance of artists engaging with their time, it's aim, however, is primarily to ask: where does engagement end and exploitation begin?

Biography:

Mary Sherman is an artist and the director of TransCultural Exchange, which she founded in Chicago in 1989. She also teaches at Boston College and Northeastern University and, in 2010 served as the interim Associate Director of MIT's Program in Art, Culture and Technology (ACT). Additionally, for two decades, she worked as an art critic for such publications as *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *ARTnews*. She has received a number of grants and awards, including three Fulbright Senior Specialist Grants (Taipei, Istanbul and Trondheim), served as a grants juror for such organizations as the National Endowment for the Arts and been an artist-in-residence at such institutions as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Taipei Artist Village. A frequent lecturer on international artistic exchange, she has given talks at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, the Freie Universität's Global Humanities Campus and Northwestern University's Leadership in Creative Enterprises Speaker Series, among others.